

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 18519

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, IN
SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL: AN INDECISIVE DENOUEMENT APPROACHES

REF: NEW DELHI 17960

1. SINCE OUR LAST REPORT (REFTEL), THE CENTER OF ACTION IN THE CONTINUING SAGA OF WEST BENGAL CHIEF MINISTER S.S. RAY'S STRUGGLE TO REMAIN IN OFFICE HAS SWITCHED FROM CLCUTTA TO DELHI. THE REMOVAL OF ORISSA CHIEF MINISTER SATPATHY ON DECEMBER 16 (NEW DELHI 18207) APPEARS TO HAVE ACTED AS A CATALYST IN BRINGING ABOUT THE INTENSE ACTIVITY WHICH WE HAVE WITNESSED IN THE CAPITAL IN THE PAST SEVERAL DAYS. ANTI-RAY FORCES IN WEST BENGAL WERE JUBILANT OVER MRS. SATPATHY'S OUSTER AND AT A RALLY IN CENTRAL CALCUTTA IMMEDIATELY URGED PRIME MINISTER GANDHI TO FOLLOW UP HER ACTION IN ORISSA BY REMOVING RAY. THE ANTI-RAY CONGRESSMEN AT THE SAME RALLY OPENELY CRITICIZED CHIEF MINISTER RAY, AND ALSO DENOUNCED THETWO MAJOR RAY SUPPORTERS, P.R. DAS MUNSHI AND LAKSHMI KANTA BOSE, FOR HAVING FORMED AN "OPPORTUNIST ALLIANCE", WHICH WOULD DISRUPT THE PARTY AND FURTHER THE CAUSE OF THE CPI.

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2. RAY WAS SUMMONED TO DELHI ON THE EVENING OF DECEMBER 17 AND IMMEDIATELY BEGAN A ROUND OF TALKS WITH MRS. GANDHI AND CONGRESS PRESIDENT BAROOAH. HOWEVER, INSTEAD OF A SHORT VISIT TO RECEIVE THE FINAL "COUP DE GRACE" FROM THE PRIME MINISTER A LA MRS. SATPATHY, RAY'S RETURN TO CALCUTTA HAS BEEN CONTINUOUSLY POSTPONED AND HE HAS NOW BEEN IN THE CAPITAL FOR ALMOST

A WEEK. RAY'S ARRIVAL IN DELHI WAS QUICKLY FOLLOWED BY A PROCESSION OF WEST BENGAL CONGRESS FACTION LEADERS, MLA'S AND MEMBERS OF HIS OWN CABINET TO THE CAPITAL FOR FURTHER MEETINGS WITH THE CONGRESS HIGH COMMAND. MOST OF THESE TURNED OUT TO BE PROMINENT OPPONENTS OF RAY AND INCLUDED WBPCP PRESIDENT ARUN MOITRA, PCC GENERAL SECRETARIES NITYANANDA DEY AND NURUL ISLAM, AND STATE MINISTERS GHANI KHAN CHOWDHURY AND TARUN KANTI GHOSH.

3. WHILE RAY WAS COOLING HIS HEELS IN DELHI (HE REPORTEDLY SPENT HIS TIME WATCHING THE ENGLAND-INDIA CRICKET MATCHES ON TV) LEADERS OF THE ANTI-RAY FACTION WERE MEETING WITH MRS. GANDHI, BAROAH, SANJAY GANDHI, AND A GALAXY OF SENIOR CENTRAL MINISTERS: BANKING MINISTER PRANAB MUKHERJEE, COMMERCE MINISTER CHATTOPADHYAYA, HOME MINISTER REDDY, MINISTER OF STATE FOR HOME AFFAIRS OM MEHTA, AGRICULTURE MINISTER JAGJIVAN RAM AND FINANCE MINISTER SUBRAMANIAM. THEY EVEN CALLED ON PRESIDENT AHMED. RAY MET WITH THE PM AGAIN ON DECEMBER 22.

4. SO FAR, NO DECISIONS HAVE BEEN ANNOUNCED AS A RESULT OF THESE MARATHON DISCUSSIONS, ALTHOUGH CONGEN CALCUTTA REPORTS THAT, ACCORDING TO SEVERAL OF ITS LOCAL SOURCES, THE FOLLOWING SOLUTION OF POLITICAL CRISIS WILL BE ANNOUNCED LATER TODAY IN DELHI: RAY WILL REMAIN AS CHIEF MINISTER; INDUSTRIES MINISTER TARUN KANTI GHOSH WILL BECOME HOME MINISTER (PORTFOLIO CURRENTLY HELD BY RAY); JAINAL ABEDIN, CURRENTLY MINISTER FOR PUBLIC UNDERTAKINGS, WILL TAKE OVER FROM GHOSH AS MINISTER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRIES; WEST BENGAL CONGRESS PRESIDENT ARUN MAITRA WILL TAKE OVER ABEDIN'S PORTFOLIOS; AND A SIX-MAN GROUP TO OVERSEE ADMINISTRATION OF STATE WILL BE ESTABLISHED. MEMBERS OF THIS GROUP WILL BE CHIEF
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MINISTER, TWO OF HIS NOMINEES, POWER AND IRRIGATION MINISTER A.B.A. GHANI KHAN CHAUDHURY, ABEDIN, AND T.K. GHOSH.

5. COMMENT: IF THE REPORT FROM CALCUTTA PROVES TRUE, RAY WILL APPEAR TO HAVE DEMONSTRATED HIS REMARKABLE TENACITY. ON THE SURFACE, IT APPEARS TO MOST OBSERVERS THAT HE HAS WON THIS ROUND AGAINST FORMIDABLE ODDS. INDEED, RAY HAD SOME FAVORABLE CARDS IN HIS OWN DECK. HE STILL SEEMS TO CONTROL THE SUPPORT OF THE MAJORITY OF THE CONGRESS MLA'S IN THE STATE LEGISLATURE, AND CONGEN CALCUTTA REPORTS THAT VIRTUALLY ALL CONGRESS LEADERS IN THE CITY OF CALCUTTA ARE BEHIND RAY. IN ADDITION, HE HAS POWERFUL CONGRESS FACTION ALLIES WHO CONTROL LARGE GROUPS OF "GOONDAS" IN WEST BENGAL AND WHO COULD CAUSE CONSIDERABLE LAW AND ORDER PROBLEMS FOR THE GOI IF INCENSED OVER RAY'S SUMMARY DISMISSAL. THE MOST IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION MAY BE MRS. GANDHI'S REALIZATION THAT WEST BENGAL IS NOT A POLITICALLY UNSOPHISTICATED STATE LIKE ORISSA AND THAT A PRE-EMPTORY FIRING OF RAY AT THIS POINT WOULD BE A FAR TOO BLATANT DEMONSTRATION

OF THE CENTER'S (AND HER) ARBITRARY POWER OVER THE STATES. BENGALIS ARE KNOWN FOR THEIR POLITICAL SENSITIVITIES, AND SUCH A MOVE COULD AROUSE ACUTE BENGALI HOSTILITY TOWARD THE CENTER. NUMEROUS DELHI DIPLOMATS AND INDIAN POLITICAL OBSERVERS, AS WELL AS CONGEN CALCUTTA, HAVE NOTED THAT A REVIVAL OF THE VIOLENCE OF THE LATE 1960'S COULD NOT BE RULED OUT IN THE STATE IF BENGALIS WERE SUFFICIENTLY ANGERED BY OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE IN BENGALI AFFAIRS.

6. NONETHELESS, THE CONSENSUS HERE THAT RAY'S DAYS AS CHIEF MINISTER ARE NUMBERED AND THAT HE WILL HAVE TO GO EVENTUALLY. IF THE COMPROMISE SOLUTION DESCRIBED BY CONGEN CALCUTTA COMES TO PASS, IT IS AT BEST A SHORT-TERM EXPEDIENT DESIGNED TO GET EVERYONE OFF THE HOOK FOR THE MOMENT. ONE PROMINENT CONGRESS MP RECENTLY TOLD THE POLCOUNSELOR THAT THE "FAMILY" IS DETERMINED TO REMOVE RAY AT SOME POINT, THE PRESTIGE OF SANJAY GANDHI (WHO IS GENERALLY BELIEVED TO BE BEHIND THE OUST-RAY MOVEMENT) HAS BEEN PLACED ON THE LINE IN THIS AFFAIR, AND FOR RAY TO REMAIN IN OFFICE INDEFINITELY WOULD BE A SERIOUS LOSS OF FACE FOR HIM. CONFIDENTIAL

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WE TEND TO VIEW THE PRESENT COMPROMISE (IF IT HAPPENS) AS AN EXAMPLE OF ONE OF MRS. GANDHI'S FAVORITE TACTICS WHEN CONFRONTED WITH AN OBSTREPEROUS PROBLEM: MAINTAIN THE FACADE AND YET GRADUALLY REDUCE THE POWER AND INFLUENCE OF THE PERSON IN QUESTION. RAY WILL BE ALLOWED TO STAY IN OFFICE, BUT WILL LOSE THE HOME MINISTRY PORTFOLIO. THE SIX-MAN COMMITTEE TO VERSEE THE STATE'S ADMINISTRATION WILL OBVIOUSLY BE A POWERFUL CHECK ON THE CHIEF MINISTER'S LATITUDE FOR POLITICAL MOVEMENT, IF IT WORKS AT ALL. RAY MAY FIND THAT THE TRAPPINGS OF THE CHIEF MINISTERSHIP WILL INCREASINGLY LOSE THEIR LUSTER AS HIS POWER IS PROGRESSIVELY CIRCUMSCRIBED SCHNEIDER UNQTE SCHNEIDER

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